

**“Not Exactly What I Dreamed:” Decolonization and Re-Orientation  
of the American Dream in the Novels of Junot Díaz**

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**By**

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**Abstract:**

The Dominican republic has a long history of oppression and colonization beginning with the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492, and arguably ending with the assassination of Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo in 1961. Though the systematic colonization has ostensibly come to an end for the Dominican Republic, the social trauma is still present and manifests itself in the cultural tendencies and behaviors of the island's inhabitants, as well as its immigrants. This essay serves to document one of the many traumas of the Dominican Republic's history of colonial violence. Dominican-American author and immigrant Junot Díaz moved his country's writings from the margin of the American literary canon to the center with his 2007 novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2008. This novel is the middle book in a series of three, the most recent of which, *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012) represents a marked shift in focus and representation from that of the first book, a collection of short stories entitled *Drown* (1996). *Drown* can be said to document the various economic factors that affect the lives of Dominican immigrants and their decisions to immigrate to the United States. Yet, his most recent two books emphasize the characters' searches for romantic love against their own Dominican histories of oppression and violence. I understand and interpret Díaz's thematic shift to be a renouncement of the traditionally accepted and economically predicated American dream, and a reorientation of that dream toward an aspiration centered on what Díaz terms "decolonial love."

Thus, this essay will illuminate the particulars of Díaz's devaluation of an economically predicated national dream, and his re-orientation away from such a dream toward one based on a distinctly decolonized affective love. I will first examine the history of colonial oppression that characterizes the Dominican Republic, which will necessarily involve Díaz's protagonists Oscar and Yunior and the ways in which their own personal histories of colonization and oppression are specifically manifested and influence their relationships, and, ultimately, their search for decolonial love. Then, the final portion of this essay will examine the economic struggles of Dominican immigrants in contrast with Díaz's emphasis in his books on romantic love. I will discuss how decolonial love specifically frees characters like Yunior and Oscar from the colonial structures of hyper-masculinity and sexual domination in ways that economic outcomes cannot. As well, I will briefly discuss how Díaz might suggest Yunior and Oscar purge themselves of these colonial structures through writing as testimony.

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*I would like to acknowledge Dr. Emily Rutter for all her incredible work and support during this process. Her help and comments have been invaluable to me, and I could not have completed this project without her guidance, support, advice, patience, and expertise. I would not be the student I am today with her.*



**Process Analysis Statement:**

I originally knew I had to write my thesis about Junot Díaz when I read—no, encountered—*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in a literature survey class with Dr. Rutter. The complexity and precision of this novel in documenting the diaspora of the Dominican peoples so personally through his characters, Yunior and Oscar, was alluring and made the book impossible to put down. When the semester was through, I knew I had to read his other two books, if only out of curiosity. After reading them, I immediately began to use my meager skills as a budding literature major to work making thematic connections between the three books, and kept this series in my back pocket as I progressed through my literature studies. After taking two more courses with Dr. Rutter, it became apparent to me that my own personal literary interests involved diaspora and translocation: a theme most certainly dealt with in Junot Díaz's writing.

Once I knew I wanted to write my thesis over Díaz, I contacted Dr. Rutter and she agreed to advise me through the process. I started the research for my thesis in the fall of 2016 where I read most of the current scholarship available on Díaz's writing. Through these critical essays, I encountered several books and sources, many of which fill my works cited page. This reading process was highly fruitful in helping me to narrow down my argument, and as well informed me about all the various aspects to Dominican culture and immigration. I wanted to know the background behind why Díaz chose to write his novels and short stories.

The following semester, spring of 2017, I began the writing process which was unlike my previous experiences. Thus far in my career as an English major, I had exclusively written all of my required essays in one sitting. I found that I could easily chew on a thesis or topic in my head for a week or two before a deadline before sitting down to write the paper with enough time to revise before the due date. But, the sheer size and length of this essay required me to break up the writing into parts. Incidentally, it was through this process of breaking up my writing that allowed me to revise and hone my essay to center around an exceptionally precise and clear argument. Simply mulling an idea over in my mind a few weeks before the due date would not cut it for this project.

Once I began reading sources and books related to my project and started to synthesize my ideas on paper, I neglected to document or catalog any quotes or relevant parts of these sources for later use. This was frustrating, and I ended up making hard copies of each essay I read so that I could manually annotate them for later reference. I carried all my printed articles,



primary texts, and critical books and textbooks with me to the library when I planned to write so that I could have them in one place. This was a tedious but helpful tool that allowed me to easily remember and find sources relevant to the various ideas presented in my essay. Another hurdle I had to work through was scheduled university breaks. Going almost a month over Christmas break, and week over spring break without thinking about or reading anything relevant to my project stifled my ability to start the writing process at the start of the spring 2017 semester. I eventually learned to settle into a “groove,” a precise schedule where I would visit the library twice per week to read, research, and write. In retrospect, I wish I would have started my writing process with this schedule already in place.

For this essay, I did not use an outline format, but rather let the writing process lead me to my own argument’s needs. After writing and meeting with Dr. Rutter twice over my introduction alone, I began to see where my argument would need to go, and the writing process took me there. I felt that his organic process of writing afforded me the most freedom to add or subtract necessary or unnecessary counterparts to my over-arching argument as I saw fit. It also opened up alternative avenues of discovery that led me to, for instance, finding Margot Canaday’s book about sexuality and the state, which now serves to strongly support one of my readings of a particular text and bolster my own thematic arguments—though I did not ever intend to include such a book. This type of organic process did not restrict me to a pre-formed outline that could have limited my arguments and gave me freedom to alter them as I saw fit on a rolling basis. Even though it took significantly longer due to the intercessory research and “rabbit trails” that accompanied it, I would do it the same way in the future. It was one such rabbit trail discovery that led me to scrapping my then eight-page introduction with 5 weeks before semester’s end so I could reframe my argument in more precise and effective terms. Even though the process took longer, I discovered that it allowed me an expansive freedom to say what *needed* to be said (and say it more clearly), than what I thought *should have been said* in a defined outline.

To me, this thesis represents the work it takes to produce a scholarly-level article from an original observation and argument—the kind of work undertaken by literary scholars. Since I aspire to go on to a Ph.D. program and do this type of work, this essay taught me much about my own habits and processes, particularly those that work best and those that don’t. Now that it is completed, I have identified that my tendency to think only in my head, rather than on paper through writing, hinders me from making my arguments as sharp as they can be. While I have



been gifted with the ability to think about an essay idea for a week or two and write it out all at once with satisfactory results, I realize now that the writing process is one to be trusted because it is proven and highly effective. Dr. Rutter told me at the beginning of my writing that I would not really know what I wanted to say until I started writing. This turned out to be true, and not something I would have learned about myself until I would undertake a large research project like my thesis.

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“Not Exactly What I Dreamed:” Decolonization and Re-Orientation of the American Dream  
in the Novels of Junot Díaz

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous life of Oscar Wao* (2008), published several years after his collection of short stories entitled *Drown* (1996), Junot Díaz documents the familial history of the Dominican de Leon family, whose past is haunted by the curse of “fukú,” a curse of colonialism passed down through Dominican progeny. In the book, the narrator and co-protagonist Yunior de las Casas recounts the history of co-protagonist Oscar de Leon and his search for reciprocal love and affection given a distinctly destructive past. But, in the oeuvre of Díaz’s writings, readers also understand that Yunior is pining after the same, seemingly elusive goal. Díaz’s subsequent and latest short story collection, *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012), follows Yunior and his search for what Díaz terms, in an interview with Stanford professor Paula M. Moya, “decolonial love:”

In *Oscar Wao* we have a family that has fled, half-destroyed, from one of the rape incubators of the New World and they are trying to find love. But not just any love. How can there be “just any love” given the history of rape and sexual violence that created the Caribbean—that Trujillo uses in the novel? The kind of love that I was interested in, that my characters long for intuitively, is the only kind of love that could liberate them from that horrible legacy of colonial violence. I am speaking about decolonial love. (Moya)



This decolonial love can be explained only in reference to the history of rape and sexual violence that, quite literally, “created the Caribbean,” and, by extension, the Dominican Republic (DR) of which Díaz’s characters are descended. Yet, the Dominican peoples’ haunting relationship with systematic oppression and exploitation beginning with the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492 and extending up through the assassination of Rafael Trujillo in 1961<sup>1</sup> continues to echo throughout the Dominican social consciousness even today. Accordingly, Díaz frames his characters’ struggles for decolonial relationships as struggles against a colonized past, against an aggressive and violent history that haunts their maturation, search for identity, and endeavors to find love.

This essay will work with the pre-occupation of romantic love that exists in Díaz’s two most recent works, and how they interact with the focus of his first major work, *Drown*. This collection can be characterized as a bildungsroman which follows an adolescent Yunior and his immigration to the U.S. with his mother and brother in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. While the collection, largely, is connected by the theme of diaspora and immigration literature, it readily depicts the working-class Dominican immigrants who are paralyzed into low-wage jobs and destitute neighborhoods, and their subsequent inability to realize the dreams and aspirations they had which compelled them to leave the DR in the first place. Dominican historian and scholar Patricia Pessar examines this class of people, which make up the near sum-total of all Dominican-American immigrants, in her book, *A Visa For a Dream: Dominicans in the United States* (1995). Specifically, her book analyzes the post-Trujillo diaspora of Dominicans in the

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<sup>1</sup> Many, including Díaz himself in *Oscar Wao*, would maintain that the regime of colonization and oppression continued even through Trujillo’s successor, Joaquín Balaguer. Díaz (through Yunior) tells us that when Dominicans “first uttered the word freedom” after Trujillo’s death, “the demon they summoned was Balaguer” (*Oscar Wao* 90, emphasis in text). Díaz may have a case, but I do not include him as an oppressor, because it was he who lifted the travel restrictions after the death of Trujillo that allowed Dominicans to migrate to the U.S.

U.S. of which Yunior's family is part of, and their struggle to achieve what she terms the "Dominican dream." In her book, she reveals this "dream," where a Dominican immigrant in the U.S. would arrive at a level of financial stability substantial enough to send money back home to the DR and eventually return for good, to be an economically predicated myth which has unfortunately perpetuated itself as an attainable reality even up until the start of the twenty-first century. This dream, in her words, is but a collection of mere "fictions of success" for Dominicans nationals and immigrants alike which can never be fully realized. In fact, the economic reality of Dominican immigrants is a far-cry from what they had imagined when they began to flood into the U.S. in the early 1960's as will later be discussed.

Díaz confronts the bleak realities directly in *Drown*, which, in the words of critic Marisel Moreno, represents a crucial "breakthrough of Dominican-American literature due to its urban working-class perspective" (104). She goes on to explain that "in presenting the negative side of the Dominican diaspora, his narratives contest the myth of the 'Dominican dream'...systematically [challenging] the fictions of success that have persisted in the Dominican imaginary" (107). Moreno's observations are key in understanding how Díaz views concepts like the "Dominican dream," and why he moves away from representing these urban working-class struggles in *Drown*, and towards a preoccupation with romantic love in *Oscar Wao* and *How You Lose Her*. That is, I see Díaz rejecting—not just in *Drown*, but in his later two works as well—the concept of an economically centered aspiration like the Dominican dream outlined by Pessar, and decolonizing these types of dreams by positing the pursuit of decolonial love as its replacement. Consider these words from Yunior at the end of *Oscar Wao*:

It's not exactly what I dreamed about when I was a kid, the teaching, the living in New Jersey, but I make it work as best I can. I have a wife I adore and who adores



me, a negrita from Salcedo whom I do not deserve, and sometimes we even make vague noises about having children...I don't run around after girls anymore. Not much, anyway. When I'm not teaching or coaching baseball or going to the gym or hanging out with the wifey I'm at home, writing. These days I write a lot. From can't see in the morning to can't see at night. Learned that from Oscar. I'm a new man, you see, a new man, a new man. (Díaz 326)

In this passage, Yuniór explains where he finds his source of contentment given his past of struggle and pain: his wife whom “he adores” and who adores him in return. Here, it is in romantic love that Yuniór finds his ultimate fulfillment after coming to grips with his inability to have the economic outcome which he “dreamed about” as a kid. In fact, Díaz’s three books are structured in such a way as to present Yuniór as a similar character in each work, but not necessarily the same person. This type of character archetype allows Díaz to showcase Yuniór experiencing the same struggles—finding love against a colonial past—at different points in his life. For instance, the Yuniór of *How You Lose Her* is a highly promiscuous character as a result of an elusive, radical discontent he feels at his situation in life even though he has, for all intents and purposes, achieved the American dream by becoming a professor at Harvard University. However, the Yuniór we see in the latter portions of *Oscar Wao* “[doesn’t] run around after girls anymore,” since finding his “wifey,” implying that he has found contentment in his romantic relationship outside of his economic endeavors.<sup>2</sup> This means that, thematically, the Yuniór of *Drown* has yet to find fulfillment and contentment in his economic situation as a young man freshly immigrated from the DR, the Yuniór of *How You Lose Her* has yet to find contentment in his romantic situation, and the later Yuniór of *Oscar Wao* has ostensibly come to find his

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<sup>2</sup> The Yuniór of *Oscar Wao* is also a professor, though teaching at a community college in New Jersey rather than at an Ivy League institution in Boston.

contentment and fulfillment in his romantic—and arguably decolonial—romantic partnership with his wife. Yet, an important note being that romantic love is not the only type of love that Díaz includes in his definition of decolonial love. For a type of love to be decolonial, it stands to reason that it must have been colonized in the first place, of which romantic relationships and affections were not alone in the type of colonization Díaz refers to, as will be discussed later.

Therefore, this essay will make the case that this representative sampling of Yunior's position in relation to his own fulfillment and contentment at different periods of his life illuminates the particulars of Díaz's devaluation of an economically predicated national dream, and his re-orientation away from such a dream toward one based on a distinctly decolonized affective love. I will first examine the history of colonial oppression that characterizes the Dominican Republic, which will necessarily involve Díaz's protagonists Oscar and Yunior and the ways in which their own personal histories of colonization and oppression are specifically manifested and influence their relationships, and ultimately, their search for decolonial love. Then, the final portion of this essay will examine the economic struggles of Dominican immigrants against Díaz's emphasis in his books on romantic love. I will discuss how decolonial love specifically frees characters like Yunior and Oscar from the colonial structures of hyper-masculinity and sexual domination. As well, I will briefly discuss how Díaz might suggest Yunior and Oscar purge themselves of these colonial structures through writing as testimony.

### ***Dominican Exploitation and Diaspora***

The Dominican history of colonial oppression is central to understanding why Díaz's characters continually search for “decolonial” love that breaks the curse of fukú. Near the end of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, before his death on DR soil, Oscar sends several



manuscripts home to his sister residing in the U.S. that are later given to Yunior for study. In these texts, Yunior finds various anecdotes and scribbling in the margins, one of which reads: “[my next package] contains everything I’ve written on this journey. Everything I think you will need. You’ll understand when you read my conclusions. (It’s the cure to what ails us...The Cosmo DNA)” (Díaz 333). This “cure” must be precisely what Díaz mentions in his interview with Paula Moya: decolonial, romantic love, which Oscar ostensibly finds during his fling with Ybón, whom he meets in the DR and is later killed because of his affair with her. But what causes characters like Oscar and Yunior to search for decolonial love? The answer is found in the violent history of the Dominican Republic.

The reign of Rafael Trujillo in the DR from 1930 until his assassination in 1961 explains the mass exodus of Dominican nationals into the United States seeking economic opportunity, but the factors that caused this mass diaspora started much earlier than 1930. As the opening lines of *Oscar Wao* explain, the fukú curse of domination and exploitation at the hands of violent colonizers “came first from...the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began” (Díaz 1). The Taínos were the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean before European aggressors decimated the culture and began importing African slaves.<sup>3</sup> This “Curse and the Doom of the New World,” as Díaz writes, was established once the New World was discovered by Christopher Columbus and others, and continued on until the assassination of DR dictator Rafael Trujillo in 1961. Trujillo, according to our narrator, Yunior, ruled the DR with an “implacable, ruthless brutality,” and sought (and succeeded) to control nearly every aspect of Dominican life via “violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror” (Díaz 2). It is

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<sup>3</sup> It is estimated that nearly 90% of the indigenous Taíno population were killed at the hands of Spanish colonists by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, after which African slaves were imported to the island in their place—a near literal replacement of “worlds” that Díaz refers to in his opening paragraphs of *Oscar Wao* (Torres-Saillant and Hernández; Kunsu 214).

this reign of Trujillo that Díaz focuses on in his novel as a representative of the DR's violent history of oppression, most likely because of the ubiquitous nature of his iron fist. In the same section where Yunior describes the dictator, critic Monica Hanna understands that "[Trujillo set] out to occupy the physical spaces" in addition to the imaginative and conscious spaces of the Dominican people (503). His renaming of landmarks and cities after himself, his suppression of the press, and his threat of violence against those who spoke out against his administration all speak to his complete, ubiquitous domination of the island. Thus, for Díaz, Trujillo is the cumulative epitome of all things related to Dominican oppression beginning with the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492.

Yet, the DR also has an extensive history with both the social and economic exploitation of its people. Such severe exploitation, in fact, that Díaz uses rape as analogy for it—even going so far as to refer to the DR as the “rape incubator of the New World,” and telling Moya that the European colonization of the New World was, in and of itself, a “rape culture” (Moya). We see the construction of the DR as a space rampant with sexual exploitation through Díaz's descriptions of Rafael Trujillo as an aggressive and dominating womanizer who will have all the women he so pleases. Not purely a construction of Díaz's imagination and based in fact, Díaz describes him through Yunior, saying, “Trujillo might have been a dictator, but he was a Dominican Dictator, which is another way of saying he was the Number-One Bellaco in the Country. Believed that all the toto in the DR was, literally, his,” “bellaco” being a Spanish slang term for a highly libidinous male (*Oscar Wao* 217). This description of Trujillo establishes several things about the rape culture of the DR, firstly that the DR is a space where all “toto” belongs to Trujillo as an extension of his reign as dictator. Díaz's colloquial synonymization of “Dominican Dictator” with “Number-One Bellaco” reveals the haunting unwritten knowledge



that DR residents understand about their dictators both past and present—that they are free to pursue any sexual impulses they please as an extension of their rule. This establishes the systemic, sexually exploitative nature of the DR and explains, in part, its past history and characterization of exploitation and rape.

Yunior's description continues, however, as he explains (in quite uncomfortable terms), that "it is a well-documented fact that in Trujillo's DR if you were of a certain class and you put your cute daughter anywhere near El Jefe [Trujillo], within a week she'd be mamando his ripio like an old pro *and there would be nothing you could do about it!*" (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 217, emphasis in text). Yunior's unpacified and explicit, italicized emphasis on the inability to prevent such an egregious crime demonstrates the degree to which such an exploitative, dominative, and oppressive characterization of the DR is normative to its citizens. Since this clear culture of sexual exploitation and, in Díaz's words, "rape culture" is common knowledge to DR citizens, it would logically leave characters like Yunior searching for a love that is decolonial in nature—a romantic and sexual love that is not a product of force or coercion.

### ***Yunior and Sexual Assault: Reasons for Decolonial Love***

This understanding of the culture of sexual assault and rape is evident in the lives of both Yunior and Oscar, Díaz's two protagonists in both his short story collection, *Drown*, and in his novel, *Oscar Wao*. Díaz speaks in the aforementioned interview that Yunior is certainly a victim of sexual assault, even though explicit evidence may not be present in the text. Short of committing the intentional fallacy, it is important to consider Díaz's words when he explains a section of *Oscar Wao* to Moya:

I always wrote Yunior as being a survivor of sexual abuse. He has been raped, too. The hint of this sexual abuse is something that's present in *Drown* and it is one of the great silences in *Oscar Wao*. This is what Yunior can't admit, his very own *página en blanco*. So, when he has that line in the novel: "I'd finally try to say the words that could have saved us. / \_\_\_\_\_," what he couldn't say to Lola was that "I too have been molested." He could bear witness to everyone else's deep pains but, in the end, he couldn't bear witness to his own sexual abuse. (Moya)

Where I am cautious to rely solely on Díaz's own interpretation of the text, I find that we cannot ignore the possibility that Yunior's highly promiscuous and sexually imperialist, dominative behavior with respect to women is a reaction to his own unacceptable experience with sexual exploitation and assault given his Dominican machismo upbringing.

Yunior's own explicit history with sexual assault is first foreshadowed as a minor incident reminiscent of a later story in *Drown* that can be paralleled with Yunior. The minor incident, which we later find precedes a metaphorical rape in Díaz's short story "Ysrael" from *Drown*, happens on a weekend when Yunior and his brother, Rafa, decide they will travel to the Dominican countryside to see for themselves a "freak" named Ysrael, whom they heard was mauled by a pig. While on a bus going to Ysrael's town, Yunior sits down next to an older man who tries to rub a stain out of Yunior's pants. Yunior narrates, "he spit in his fingers and started to rub at the stain but then he was pinching at the tip of my pinga through the fabric of my shorts. He was smiling. I shoved him against his seat...the man squeezed my bicep, quietly, hard...I whimpered" (Díaz 12). This incident on the bus is a clear sexual assault which angers and confuses an adolescent Yunior. Yet, his first reaction, metaphorically speaking, is domination by



shoving the older man against the seat. Later in the story, Yunior and Rafa show the ultimate sign of domination when they subdue Ysrael and tear off the mask which hides his injuries. The scene is reminiscent of a rape in which the most intimate parts of a person's privacy and identity are compromised at the forceful hand of another. Consider how even Ysrael's entire persona as a "freak" is created in the story up until the mask is removed, and his mauled face is forcefully put on display without his consent. In this way, Yunior's reaction to sexual assault can be categorized as aggressive and proactive where he seeks to subdue and conquer in reaction to his own domination.

The hyper-masculine behavior displayed by Yunior is further understood by exploring Yunior's own history of sexual exploitation and is evident in his various relationships and attitudes toward women in general found in *Oscar Wao* and *How You Lose Her*, where Yunior is seen as a character who cannot "keep [his] rabo in [his] pants," a self-admitted "sucio" who obsessively endeavors to have sex with women, one after another (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 311, 169). I will attempt to explain Yunior's behavior by comparing it against the behaviors of the unnamed narrator of the story "Drown," from the 1996 collection with the same name. In the story, the narrator is abruptly molested by his best friend, Beto, while watching a pornographic video and later participates in other molestations with him. There are parallels between Yunior's behavior as documented in *Oscar Wao* and the narrator's emotional development post-molestation, from which there is insight into how and why Yunior's past of sexual exploitation influences his search for a specifically decolonial love.

The narrator's post-molestation emotional development is similar to that of Yunior as revealed in *Oscar Wao*. Post-incident—which is itself told in flashback—the narrator of "Drown" is given a book by Beto when he bids him goodbye for college, which the narrator

promptly throws away, and does not “bother to open it and see what he’d written” (Díaz 107). Similarly, the story begins with his refusal to acknowledge Beto as a friend when his mother mentions that he is in town. His snub of Beto’s book and his aversion to recognizing their relationship is significant because these emotional responses can be categorized as a repression of an unacceptable event or set of emotions that are in conflict with their upbringing in a colonial, hyper-masculine society. That is, his experiences and confusion are not acceptable in the eyes of a dogmatically heterosexual, hyper-masculine Dominican culture. Consider also the narrator’s description of Beto upon learning he is back in town: “He’s a pato now, but two years ago we were friends” (Díaz 91). Here the narrator reduces the once vibrant and benevolent history of his friendship with Beto to calling him only “pato,” a Spanish epithet for a gay man similar to “fag.” Again, the narrator represses and denies the whole history of his friendship with Beto, presumably because it is haunted by sexual exploitation.

The narrator’s next stage of emotional development, which most closely aligns with the behaviors and attitudes exhibited by Yuniór can be best described by what gender historian and author Margot Canaday terms “passing,” which refers to the masking of one’s sexuality in order to “pass” as another to maintain social or economic status (256). This passing is exhibited in textbook fashion by the narrator of “Drown,” vis-à-vis his indecision and passive consent during the molestations, which reveal his own confusion in regard to his sexuality and subsequent compulsion to mask it. In the first incident, when Beto abruptly grabs his penis, the narrator is “too scared to watch,” instead looking at the television, where a pornographic video was playing (Díaz 104). In the next recorded incident, the two are home alone, and Beto tells him, “I’ll stop if you want,” to which the narrator “[does not] respond” (Díaz 105). In the final incident, the slamming of a neighbor’s door interrupts them, and the narrator explains that, “he [Beto] was



laughing, but I was saying, Fuck this [sic], and getting my clothes on” (Díaz 106). In all three of these incidents, he is presented with an opportunity to act and flee from the assaults, but fear paralyzes him into indecision and inaction. His “passive consent,” in the words of critic Dorothy Stringer, reveal his own “fear of discovery and homophobic self-loathing in the aftermath” of his molestation which compel him to “pass” as a staunch heterosexual (121). Stringer explains further that the “self-hate and self-doubt” that come from experiencing sexual shame “institutionalize...the specific form of passing-for-straight” (119). His passing takes the form of anti-gay expressions that cement his identity among his peers as a “true” heterosexual Dominican male. He looks at gay men with disdain, describing them in slurs: “we pass the fag bar...Patos all over the parking lot, drinking and talking” (Drown 103). Our narrator then, as a reaction to his sexual assault, seeks to remove all external and internal doubt about his sexuality by passing as anti-gay as a defense mechanism against—and response to—his own sexual victimhood. That is, the narrator, though evidentially confused about his own sexuality, does not cease to pass for straight anyway in order to repress his emotions that result from his sexual encounters with Beto. This is the narrator’s further attempt at “self-closeting,” his effort to vehemently pass for straight in order to maintain social status in a traditionally heterosexually imperialist culture that is Dominican sexuality (Stringer 121).

This same intentional, marked homophobia can be seen in Yunior’s character in *Oscar Wao*, where he, a macho “guy who could bench 340 pounds, who used to call Demarest Homo Hall like it was nothing,” and who referred to Oscar as “that fat homo Oscar Wilde,” is perhaps the epitome of Díaz’s conception of Dominican hyper-masculinity (Oscar Wao 170, 180). Yunior’s dominative and imperial attitudes toward women are littered generously throughout the book and numerous beyond citation. Though Díaz’s construction of Oscar de Leon as a character

contrast to Yunior at the outset of *Oscar Wao* is telling: “Anywhere else his triple-zero batting average with the ladies might have passed...but this is a Dominican kid we’re talking about...dude was supposed to have Atomic Level G” (Díaz 24). As well, Yunior’s own words to the reader after being caught cheating on his partner, Suriyan, when he states, “what I should have done was check myself into Bootie-Rehab. But if you thought I was going to do that, then you don’t know Dominican men,” reveal that he, too, ostensibly like the narrator of “Drown,” feels the need to pass undeniably for straight in his Dominican community (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 175). That is, Yunior likely exhibits such hyper-masculine, homophobic behavior to prove to himself and others that he is not a “maricon” or a “pato” as a result of his past experience with sexual exploitation, and must continually prove to his Dominican community that he is not in doubt about his sexuality.

While his passing is not necessarily documentable or evidential because we have no direct evidence outside of suspicion that Yunior is confused about his sexuality, we do know that Yunior recognizes the grave necessity to emphasize his heterosexual orientation when he speaks of Abelard, Oscar’s grandfather, whose death at the hands of Rafael Trujillo was purportedly the result of fukú. He tells how the guards in charge of Abelard during his imprisonment for telling a joke about Trujillo “proceeded to tell the other prisoners that Abelard was a homosexual and a communist,” to which Abelard protested, “that is untrue!” (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 239, emphasis in text). Then, to the reader, Yunior reacts: “but who is going to listen to a gay comunista?” (239). Yunior recognizes that without heterosexuality, an individual’s social status in a Dominican community<sup>4</sup> is nearly non-existent. That is, Abelard’s status (though untrue) as a homosexual

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<sup>4</sup> Especially a community where Rafael Trujillo is at the top. In passing, Trujillo has a short conversation with Abelard at a presidential event where Trujillo asks about his wife, apparently worried that Abelard had “turned into *un maricón*,” a Spanish colloquialism for “faggot.” The people surrounding Trujillo laugh at his comment, saying, “Oh, Jefe...you are *too much*,” revealing the extent to which visible heterosexuality is not just a social expectation,



man among his fellow inmates and prison staff effectively seal his fate and eliminate all hope of exoneration or release.

Thus, Yunior's stark heterosexual attitudes coupled with his homophobia are remarkably similar to the reaction demonstrated by the narrator of "Drown" after his sexual assault. Yunior, too, displays the characteristics of Canaday's "passing" in response to sexual victimhood. Díaz's hint provided in his interview with Moya that Yunior's actions are a result of sexual assault exist outside the intentional fallacy and are corroborated by the "Drown" narrator, who shares with Yunior the same post-sexual trauma characteristics and behaviors. But, Yunior's reaction is not just and simply a reaction to sexual assault. It is especially important to remember that Yunior's character is one defined and influenced by the long history of Dominican oppression as a whole. Specifically, the larger framework of tyrannical oppression perpetuated and epitomized by Rafael Trujillo is one that trickles down into the lives of almost all young men in the DR, including Yunior. In other words, sexual assault is but one aspect that influences Yunior's various behaviors,

From Yunior's past, we gather that the type of decolonial love he seeks is one mutually beneficial for both parties, and certainly not subject to hierarchy—a love that functions in opposition to colonization. His character in *This Is How You Lose Her* is in perpetual negotiations with himself about why he can't seem to find fulfillment in relationships, and which cause him to incessantly cheat on his girlfriends. The book opens with scenes between Yunior and his girlfriend Magda, whom he truly loves and who leaves him because of his cheating. It is his lost relationship with Magda that Yunior continually compares his other relationships to

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but an expectation of the institution as well (*Oscar Wao* 221, emphasis in text). Author Margot Canaday speaks at length in her 2012 book, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, about "sexual citizenship," where sexuality becomes an entity controlled and enforced by the state—a phenomenon clearly at play during the Trujillo regime (256).

(mind that they, too, were littered with nonstop infidelity) and is continually reminiscent of throughout his later relationships documented in the book. Yunior seemingly admits to the reasons behind his infidelity when he recounts the accusations of Magda's friends, stating, "they think I cheated because I was Dominican, that all us Dominican men are dogs," to which he responds, "from my perspective it wasn't genetics; there were reasons. Casualties" (Díaz 18, 19). We can suspect that the casualties Yunior references are the casualties of pre-victim Dominican identities—casualties that are result of sexual assault and lost innocence. Later, Yunior tells the reader, "none of us [Dominicans] wanted to be niggers," or, subjects of oppression and exploitation, "not for nothing" (39). It is quite clear then, that Yunior is struggling to find decolonial romantic love as a response to his history of sexual oppression and exploitation and of his greater Dominican identity as a "nigger," an identity rooted in his relationship to an oppressive and violent colonial history.

### ***Oscar de Leon and Familial Violence: Reasons for Decolonial Love***

Where Yunior's character is primarily compelled to search for a decolonial love due to a history as both victim and perpetrator of sexual exploitation, Oscar, the co-protagonist of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, is compelled due to his family's long history of violence and oppression—a familial fukú rather than a sexual ones. The novel is almost entirely Yunior's recounting the various violent and fukú-riddled oppressive histories from Oscar's family tree that

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to suggest that sexual violence does not play a part in Oscar's familial history of violence and oppression. In fact, it can be argued that all of Oscar's familial history is haunted by sexual violence, though there is no evidence that Oscar was personally subject to sexual violence. Even in Yunior's recounting of Abelard's imprisonment in *Oscar Wao*, we understand that it was Rafael Trujillo's tendency to rape the island's young women that led Abelard to hide his daughters—an action that would eventually lead to his torture and death. Like Díaz has said, the DR—and its state specifically—is a rape culture.



Yunior claims is one big “fukú story,” “what more fukú,” than Oscar’s family history, he says (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 6).

The first story about Oscar’s family in the novel centers around Hypatía Belicia Cabral (called Beli) Oscar’s mother, described through the voice of Oscar’s sister, Lola. Lola describes Beli, explaining, “she had raised me and my brother by herself...worked three jobs” to afford a house after “being abandoned by my father” and coming to America from the DR (Díaz 59-60). Beli is presented by Lola as one who has come to America in order to achieve the economic Dominican dream as outlined earlier by Pessar. However, she also has a history of colonial violence and oppression stemming from her life in the DR. Lola mentions that Beli “claimed to have been beaten, set on fire, left for dead,” a claim corroborated by Yunior when he recounts her story in a later chapter. Further, Yunior describes Beli as one who “wanted, more than anything...to escape” from “the fact that her long-gone parents had died when she was one, the whispers that Trujillo had done it, those first years of her life...the horrible scars from that time, her own despised black skin” (Díaz 80). We understand that Beli is one shaped by her history of violence that stemmed from the Trujillo regime and her own broken childhood riddled with scars both physical and emotional. Lola ascribes her mother’s harsh parenting as products and a perpetuation of her own violent upbringing, driven by a desire to see her children realize any economic opportunity available to them. Yet, economic opportunities are not what Lola and Oscar desire out of their mother. Rather, Lola and Oscar want a relational, maternal love that they currently do not have not based on any sort of colonization or hierarchy (outside of the inherent mother-child relationship). Interestingly, Lola describes the relationship she has with her mother as distinctly colonial, stating to the reader, “you don’t know the hold our mothers

have on us...what it's like to be the perfect Dominican slave," a strikingly "Dominican" way of characterizing the mother-daughter relationship (Díaz 56).

It is this colonial familial dynamic that keeps Lola and Oscar under an iron-fist that is Beli's parenting strategy, and which causes them to perpetuate the same kinds of hierarchical attitudes she displays as a result of her own upbringing. Beli, according to Lola, "never said a positive thing in her life...always tearing you down and splitting your dreams straight down the seams" and called her "fea," "worthless," and an "idiota" (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 56). Oscar, too, experiences a similar treatment from his mother, who physically assaults him and encourages him to do the same to his childhood girlfriends, telling him, "Dale un galletazo [slap her]...then see if the little puta respects you" (*Oscar Wao* 14). But, according to Yunió, "If he'd been a different nigger he might have considered the galletazo," but he did not have "no kind of father to show him the masculine ropes...lacked all aggressive and martial tendencies" (*Oscar Wao* 15). Yunió's insight reveals that Oscar, like Lola, does not receive the type of affection from his mother that he needs and desires. Rather, Oscar is forced to choose throughout his childhood and early adulthood whether he will choose to perpetuate the violent male dominance imposed by his mother, who is both victim and perpetrator of DR hyper-masculine ideals. For both of Beli's children, they are effectively colonized by their mother whose forceful and violent parenting eventually drives them away from home looking for decolonial love. Oscar, then, in light of his own violent familial history extending evidentially back to his grandfather, Abelard, is on his own search for decolonial love just like Yunió, though not directly fueled by sexual assault.



### *Defining Decolonial Love for Yunior and Oscar*

What then, for characters like Oscar and Yunior, does decolonial love entail? How can they purge themselves of their respective colonial pasts in order to procure a truly decolonial relationship? First, a decolonial relationship—the kind Oscar and Yunior seek to find—can be characterized as a symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationship where each partner stands to benefit equally from the relationship. Further, a decolonial relationship, or love, is one not subject to structures of hierarchy, and where each partner maintains individual power and agency. But how can this be achieved and realized by Díaz's characters? Let us first examine Yunior and his romantic relationship with Lola, which is among his most significant romantic relationships in Yunior's character arc.

Yunior's explanation at the beginning of *Oscar Wao* is especially telling, when he reveals how “there was only one way to prevent disaster” at the hands of fukú, and, “not surprisingly, it's a word...Zafa” (Díaz 7). He goes on to admit that “even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell” (7). Yunior states from the outset of the novel how one can go about countering and purging oneself from the curse of fukú, a metonym for the curse of Antillean oppression, domination, and exploitation, “the Curse and the Doom of the New World” (1). Yomaira Figueroa speaks to the mechanics of this type of zafa, what she terms “faithful witnessing,” which involves bearing witness to “the physical, historical, and psychosocial violence of coloniality” (644). Yunior and Oscar need not only acknowledge the “unseen coloniality” of their behaviors and upbringing as Dominicans, but must put themselves outside of the “powers that dehumanize others,” and recognize and assert the “humanity and dignity” in their various relationships (643, 644). Since *Oscar Wao* is a history of the de Leon family and their own encounters with sexual and familial violence, as well as DR

economic exploitation and domination, Yunior's "counterspell" constitutes an acknowledgement of the DR past of violence and oppression for both himself and Oscar. Further, it demonstrates the humanity and dignity that Yunior recognizes in people who aren't even his own family, by choosing to testify their stories. So, fukú can, in effect, be defeated (and current colonial behaviors purged) through the identification and testimony of the various ways it manifests itself in the lives of the affected, since its testimony allows both recognition of past injustices and an opportunity to replace those injustices with humanity and dignity.

We can examine this acknowledgement-zafa in the lives of both Yunior and Oscar. For instance, Yunior reaches a pivotal point in his relationship with Lola whereby he has the opportunity to achieve a decolonial love with her through admitting his own past of sexual violence and assault, and his choice alone becomes a point of epiphany to himself. He realizes that all it would take to save his troubled but salvageable, mutually beneficial, decolonial relationship, was admittance. Yunior speaks to the reader in *Oscar Wao*, saying, "before all hope died I used to have this stupid dream that shit [his relationship with Lola, an arguable synecdoche for all his relationships affected by fukú] could be saved...I'd finally try to say the words that could have saved us. \_\_\_\_\_" (Díaz 327). Yunior's words before the ostensibly elliptical, "I, too, was molested," according to Díaz, help make sense of what decolonial love actually entails, and how it serves as a salvation for Dominican-Americans like Yunior (Moya). The "words that could have" saved him were the words acknowledging his own experience with sexual assault and exploitation. Yet, there are only three empty spaces, which imply to the reader, "I love you," a phrase that functions as the recognition of humanity and dignity in inhumanity's place as described by Figueroa. So, Yunior's *zafa* includes both the acknowledgement of past injustices, as well as a conscious recognition of



humanity and dignity rather than a perpetuation of his hyper-masculine, colonial, Dominican upbringing.

Similarly, Oscar experiences the chance to “zafa” his fukú through acknowledgement and testimony, and even takes it a step further by actually making such an acknowledgment during his relationship with Ybón. Oscar sends a cryptic message home from the DR, where he went to pursue his relationship with her, telling Lola in a letter that a forthcoming package from him would contain the “cure to what ails us...the Cosmo DNA” (Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 333). Yet, the next package never arrived. Though we are never told what the package contained, what the cure really was, we can guess based on Yunior’s own descriptions of Oscar’s behavior just before his death at the hands of the Trujillo regime, who Ybón was involved with. Yunior tells the reader at the end of *Oscar Wao* how he has become a “new man, a new man,” ever since taking the advice he “learned...from Oscar” to “write a lot...from can’t see in the morning to can’t see at night” (Díaz 326). Writing, for Yunior, as evidenced by his opening rationale for writing *Oscar Wao* in the first place, is a type of counterspell against the fukú, which he must have learned this from Oscar, and seeks to proclaim and acknowledge via the written word—as zafa against the fukú—as often as possible. Further, Oscar’s manuscripts impact Lola to adorn her new baby, Isis, with three “azabaches,” or Antillean good luck charms: “the one Oscar wore as a baby, the one that Lola wore as a baby, and the one that Beli was given...upon reaching Sanctuary” in the U.S. (Díaz 229). Lola, as well, understands that the fukú that haunted her own life, as well as Oscar’s and their mother’s, must be openly admitted and acknowledged so as to keep it away from Isis. Thus, even posthumously, Oscar realized as well the importance of proclamation, of openly telling of the things Dominicans don’t want to talk about; he knew it was important to openly uncover and make visible the haunting history of Dominican violence and oppression.

This is how Yunior and Oscar can begin their search for decolonial love—how they can purge themselves from their respective pasts of colonialism and oppression, both sexual and familial. They must admit their pasts in order to come to terms with it, so that they can identify the places in their lives where the hauntings of colonialism have manifested themselves and actively work against them.

***Decolonization and Re-Orientation: Decolonial love and the Dominican-American Dream***

I have so far identified how the general past history of oppression and violence of the Dominican Republic, as well as the personal histories of sexual and familial violence of Yunior and Oscar warrant a search for decolonial love. This type of love, as explained earlier, can be defined as a mutually beneficial relationship not subject to hierarchies of power, where each party holds agency independent of one another. My discussion will now shift toward how this search for decolonial love is suggested by Díaz as the Dominican dream to which Dominican immigrants to America aspire, rather than one centered on an economic outcome.

Consider once more Patricia Pessar's concept of the Dominican dream, which, like the American dream, is predicated on an economic status. She defines it as the ability of one to return back to the island after having procured the "accoutrements of an upper-class lifestyle" (Pessary xii). She also briefly mentions the "'American Immigrant dream' of going from 'rags to riches,'" and posits that most immigrants fleeing the DR come to the United State pursuing one of these two economic, aspirational dreams (xii). Yet, why the preoccupation in Díaz's books with love? Why is it that his books center on Yunior's and Oscar's romantic pursuits rather than their ruthlessly trying to climb the immigrant ladder for economic and financial gain? It is not because Pessar is wrong. Rather, I argue that Díaz sees his fellow countrymen (as a DR



immigrant himself) longing for, underneath and aside from the economic reasons they fled the DR, this decolonial love and relationships that are free from the hauntings of colonialism. That is, Díaz suggests through his writing that, on the surface, Dominican immigrants flee their country after Trujillo's death in 1961 out of economic necessity. Yet, once they arrive, they realize quickly that economic aspirations are not what they truly want and seek after (or can even have, as will be discussed). Rather, they tend to seek decolonial relationships, relationships where hierarchies of power do not exist and oppress them.

My argument does not necessarily negate the claims about economic diaspora made by Pessar, rather I recognize them as true and essential to my argument. In fact, Díaz makes reference in each of his books to the dire, poverty-ridden economic situation of Dominicans both in the DR and in the U.S. In fact, we understand that both Yunion and Oscar, as well as nearly every character in Díaz's three books are in the U.S. as a result of economic diaspora. Pessar writes that DR immigrants saw the United States as an "economic mecca," and, for them and their families, a U.S. visa "[represented] both potential and immediate economic power" (Pessar 14). As the economic situation continued to worsen into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century following several failed attempts to revive the DR economy, the 1980's saw the peak influx of Dominican immigrants where it is estimated that of the 206,719 Dominican immigrants counted in the 1990 census, a staggering 59% had immigrated in the 1980's (Grasmuck and Pessar 290). In total, from the death of Rafael Trujillo up through the year 2000, the rate of yearly Dominican immigration into the United States increased nearly 1000% (Pessar 2). It was clear that Dominicans had to leave the island in order to survive, and the U.S. was their destination of choice. This sentiment of the United States as an economic powerhouse is considered by La Inca in deciding whether to send Beli to America after she is beaten up by the Trujillato in *Oscar*

*Wao*: “[America’s] cities swarmed with machines and industry...with the glittering promise of coin” (Díaz 158). Here, La Inca recognizes that her daughter will, no doubt, be able to make money in America. Yet, she is apprehensive about the long-term gain of sending her daughter to the U.S., as she, at this point, is still living under Trujillo’s reign. Trying to weigh her options, she recognizes the ambivalence of the dire situation in the DR, saying, “Rumors flew...that the Cubans were preparing the invade, that the Marines had been spotted on the horizon. Who could know what tomorrow would bring?” (Díaz 158). Recognizing the bleak economic opportunity for her daughter in the DR, La Inca decides to send Beli to the States. But La Inca is not alone, the majority of Dominican immigrants arrived on U.S. soil in an attempt to escape the dangerous and miserable political and economic climate of a post-Trujillo DR.

Further, we understand that Dominican immigrants are stricken by poverty even in the U.S., due to their inability to find skilled employment. Yunior’s father left in *Drown* to try and find a job so he could send money home to Yunior’s mother, and his mother, too, eventually moves him and his brother, Rafa, to the U.S. for better economic opportunity. Yunior’s family left for the same reasons as Beli: economic and political stability and safety. Oscar’s mother, Beli, demonstrates the kind of poverty and economic paralysis experienced by DR immigrants in the U.S. In one scene, Lola explains Beli as “an absentee parent: if she wasn’t at work she was sleeping” (Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 54). Beli works multiple jobs in order to maintain a home for Oscar and Lola while they finish school, and her experience is not atypical of a Dominican immigrant family. First, her decision to settle the family in Paterson, New Jersey, a suburb of Newark and cousin to Long Island, New York likely means that Beli works in manual labor, and is likely a textile worker. As well, she cannot maintain her home and children with just one job, she must work several. Pessar describes New York’s economy as having restructured itself around this



large influx of low-skilled workers, explaining the “proliferation of menial, insecure, and low-paying jobs” that allow Dominican immigrants to work (33). Yet, for Oscar’s family, participating in this type of labor affords them neither the Dominican dream of returning home for good, nor the American Immigrant dream of having reasonable financial freedom. Beli herself does not even have time to participate in the lives of Oscar or Lola in a positive way, and we see Oscar and Lola both throughout the novel working or going to school so as to not end up in a position like Beli.

In other words, that economically predicated aspirations like the Dominican dream are not particularly fruitful for Dominican immigrants in the U.S. Often, the flocking of DR immigrant into places like the northeast have had a perpetuating effect on the poverty and inability to find anything other than low-wage employment (Grasmuck and Pessar). The conditions in the U.S. for Dominican immigrants is only marginally better than those in the DR. Thus, it would stand to reason why we see a reorientation away from these economic aspirations in Díaz’s books, and toward one that can truly free them from the roots of why they left, the colonial oppression and domination of the DR state. Dominican immigrants, then, in Díaz’s world, pursue their aspirations at cross-purposes, since it is through these decolonial relationships that they can obtain what they really want: freedom from oppressive powers. They flee economic inopportunity for opportunity and poverty for prosperity, but the answer to their problems do not ultimately lie in a good paying job, but in relationships that operate on a reciprocal, mutually beneficial basis.

### ***Decolonization and Re-Orientation in This Is How You Lose Her***

Though his latest collection of short stories, *This Is How You Lose Her*, also documents the economic poverty of newly immigrated Dominicans into northeastern cities like New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, it also demonstrates how the characters' search for decolonial love stands at the front of their consciousness even in the face of immediate poverty. The story, "Otravida, Otravez," from *How You Lose Her* follows the apparently decolonial version of the relationship between Yunior's father, Ramón, and his girlfriend whom he meets in the U.S. while Yunior and his mother, Virta, are in the DR. This story is particularly interesting since it offers a markedly decolonial form of the romance Ramón pursues from the story, "Negocios," from *Drown*. In both stories, Ramón is working in the U.S. and pursuing romantic relationships, but the Ramón from "Otravida, Otravez," has a stable job and steady relationship with the narrator who tells the story. The alternate versions are explained by Díaz in a 2016 interview with Hilton Als, where he states that Yunior "loves to destabilize a reader's sense of who he is and who his family is," which is a relatively cryptic answer given what is at stake (Als). Yet, I propose that Yunior, as a product of his particular emotional state in *How You Lose Her* as one trying to figure out why he can't be content, tells this version of the story because he knows it is the true version. That is, this specific version of Yunior in *How You Lose Her* is one trying to find out why he is so promiscuous, and why he cannot be content with his life even though he has made it to the top of his career as a professor at Harvard. He sees his "family foundational myth," his father moving the U.S., through a gracious and honest decolonial lens compared to the bitter one we see in "Negocios" from *Drown*, and the disinterested, guarded one manifest throughout the whole of *Oscar Wao* (Als). Thus, it stands to reason that the Ramón of "Otravida, Otravez," is trying to work through the same issues that Yunior is, and Yunior reads his father as a double,



and as a result, we get a decolonial telling of Ramón's relationship with the narrator of the story in *How You Lose Her*.

It is through Ramón's relationship with the narrator of "Otravida, Otravez," where we see Díaz reorienting the tangible preoccupation with economic gain in his Dominican-American and Dominican immigrant characters toward the abstract, aspirational preoccupation with decolonial love. Again, decolonial love is one where each party experiences mutual benefit and where hierarchies of power are null and void. We first see the move away from a preoccupation with economic pursuits when the narrator, when talking of Ramón's search for a house, mentions "how hard it is to find one when you're latino" (Díaz, *How You Lose Her*, 53). Later, she explains how "few people will sell to us," "los hispanos," and that Ramón will later see people, "usually blanquitos [white people], tending the [lawns] that should have been ours" (65). Even though Ramón is in the rare position as a Dominican-American to buy a home, the process is long, difficult, and riddled with defeat.<sup>6</sup> The homes that are even available to them are, "homes for ghosts and cockroaches," and even then, a purchase is not guaranteed. Nevertheless, Ramón claims that "to own a house in this country is to begin to live" (71). Eventually, Ramón does buy a home, an only partially-habitable "half-ruin," that the narrator complains "resembles the first place I lived when I arrived in [the U.S.]" (74). We understand in this story that any semblance of economic prosperity available to Dominican-Americans is a far-cry. Even homes barely fit

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<sup>6</sup> Buying a home as a Dominican-American immigrant is exceptionally rare. Rather, most immigrants rely on their own *cadena* ("chain"), a network of immediate and extended family who have previously immigrated, to find housing both short- and long-term (Pessar 19). It would be "virtually inconceivable" for a Dominican-American immigrant to live in commercial housing, or alone, as in Ramón's case (20). Even Ramón's partner lives in a house with many other immigrants. Perhaps the rarity of Ramón's case serves to give Ramón a clear opportunity, like Yunior in *How You Lose Her* being a Harvard professor, to find his full contentment and sense of accomplishment and arrival in his economic success. Both Yunior and Ramón in *How You Lose Her*, are at positions in which they have excelled and prospered economically and financially—yet neither are content outside of a mutually beneficial, decolonial relationship.

for living are given to whites even though Ramón has an eight-year tenure in the U.S., good references, and a high income.

Since the economic opportunities are bleak, and financial prosperity exceptionally hard to attain for Dominican immigrants and Americans of Dominican descent, we understand why and how the narrator of “Otravida, Otravez,” doesn’t consider her future in an economic or financially way. Rather, she states that there are “calamities without end,” in the U.S., and goes on to say about her relationship with Ramón, “but I can clearly see us in the future” (Díaz, *How You Lose Her*, 70). Her sense of the future is not oriented toward an economic aspiration, and abandons such an aspiration for a decolonial relationship with Ramón. Consider the mutually beneficial aspects of their relationship where each party holds power and is invested in the other. The narrator describes Ramón’s house search, saying, “He’s serious about the house, which means I have to be serious about it, too,” and, later, “I’m not one for change, I tell him,” implying she does not necessarily want to move into a house, “and later, in the car, he accuses me of sabotaging his dream, of being dura [difficult]” (Díaz 59). The relationship is not one-sided, but mutual. Ramón’s search for a home necessarily involves the female narrator—she “has to be” invested in the search because Ramón is. Likewise, Ramón himself counts his partner’s participation in the search as necessary since, without her approval, his “dream” would be “sabotaged.” Compared to Ramón’s mutually self-centered and self-seeking relationship with his new wife in “Negocios,” from *Drown*, where he “didn’t act the part of the husband,” and the two “only spoke when necessary,” Ramón and his partner in *How You Lose Her* are mutually invested and benefitted by one another, and use their respective agency for the good of the other (Díaz 206).



Yunior, like Ramón, is financially and economically successful as a Harvard professor but is clearly not content with economic prosperity. As a result, he continually tries throughout the book to understand the root of his discontentment and resulting out-of-control promiscuity, at one time cheating on Magda with fifty other women over a six-year period. He asks himself in frustration: “Fifty fucking girls?” (Díaz, *How You Lose Her* 179). He explains his process for determining the source of his unhappiness, exasperating, “You blame you father. You blame your mother. You blame the patriarchy. You blame Santo Domingo,” which, as my earlier discussions reveal are all plausible reasons for Yunior’s excessive promiscuity and continual dissatisfaction. For a while, Yunior tries to find peace through the idiomatic “clavo saca clavo,” the “one nail drives out another,” routine suggested by his friends by seeking out intentionally monogamous relationships one after another, during which he still cheats (*How You Lose Her* 185). Eventually, Yunior organically seeks out decolonial love through romantic relationship when he tells his friend, Elvis, that he found a girl he wants to date “like a normal person...without any lies” (186). His Dominican friends generally do not support this type of dating, encouraging him to revert to a patriarchal, colonial type of love where Yunior need only “bone the shit out of her,” among other things (193). Yunior is at a point in the narrative where he recognizes his need for a decolonial love. His rare situation as an economic success as far as his Dominican-American status is concerned still leaves him without resolution and on a search for contentment and is irrelevant to him. But what drives him to discover this need? Consider how the narrative arc of *How You Lose Her* begins in—and his driven by—Yunior’s longing for a past in which he apparently was fulfilled in his relationship with Magda. Thus, the majority of the book is Yunior recounting his mostly futile and unfruitful process for trying to regain that type of love, firstly through reconciliation with Magda, and eventually with other partners.

In particular, Yuniór's own search for decolonial love is identified in contrast to the various lovers he encounters throughout *How You Lose Her*, including his own girlfriends. He meets a girl whom he calls "the law student," who he sleeps with for a few nights before she leaves him. Several months later, the law student comes to Yuniór claiming he is pregnant with his baby. At first Yuniór attempts to dodge the possibility, but eventually accepts the fact that it may be his child and lets her stay in his apartment. She "[took] over two of [his] closets" and he allows her to stay as if it were his own home, and later he invests in her for her benefit—much like Ramón did for the narrator in "Otravida, Otravez"—by paying for all expenses of the pregnancy including doctors and medicines (201). Yet, as soon as the baby is born, she denies Yuniór access and moves away. It becomes clear to Yuniór that he was used by the woman for her own economic gain by paying for the pregnancy. However, he clearly had other intentions as evidenced by his seeking a decolonial relationship in earnest. That is, he sought to establish a mutually beneficial relationship void of traditional Dominican power structures with the law student, but was unfortunately taken advantage of. It is here that Yuniór grasps the definition of the type of love he is looking for, one that is reciprocal in nature and one where power functions as an investment, rather than a self-promoting, self-protective tool to be wielded over another.

Further, the ability for one to have a truly decolonial love necessarily requires acknowledgment and admittance of past hurts and wrongs. The story from which Yuniór writes about his relationship with the law student is titled, "The Cheater's Guide to Love," which is itself a self-admittance of Yuniór's past history of damaging promiscuity and dominative relationship. The title of the whole collection, *This Is How You Lose Her*, implies proclamation of a past hurt, wrong, and mistake. Thus, Yuniór is on a search for the decolonial love that he so



desperately seeks after and which is the only aspiration through which he can find contentment and fulfillment as a Dominican immigrant.

In conclusion, decolonial love is sought by the range of characters presented in the oeuvre of Díaz's work who either have, do not have, or can't achieve an economically centered aspirational goal upon entering the U.S. from the DR. Subsequently, we can infer a few things about how Díaz views the dreams, hopes, and aspirations of Dominican-American immigrants who have fled the island out of economic necessity. Firstly, that a comprehensive and lengthy history of oppression, colonialism, and domination have haunted the DR and its people ever since their Taíno ancestors were killed after the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492. This ever-present haunting of colonialism in the collective consciousness of the DR people, as presented through the stories of the de Leon family in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, principally drives DR immigrants to find a decolonial system of relationship free from the influence of oppressive power structures that have infiltrated and defined their conceptions of love, sex, and family. Yunior's incessant infidelity and promiscuity are evidence both of his personal history with sexual violence and exploitation as well as his learned desire to pass as an authentically Dominican male by dominating women through sexual escapade. Similarly, Oscar's history of familial exploitation and oppression are manifest in his mother who, as a result of her own oppression and exploitation reiterates the power structures of domination in the raising of her kids. As a result, both Yunior and Oscar must work to purge themselves from their histories so intimately crafted out of domination and colonialism in order to truly be free.

For Díaz, it is this concern, the concern for love free from these histories of oppression that preoccupy the minds of Dominican-American immigrants. That is, where Dominicans fled their country out of economic necessity, they are, of course, striving toward economic and

financial aspirations. However, Díaz uses the DR history of colonialism worked out through characters like Yunior and Oscar to correct and reorient these economic aspirations toward one of decolonial love and affection. Yunior's life, from *Oscar Wao*, in America is not "not exactly what [he] dreamed about when [he] was a kid," since his contentment and satisfaction came not from any financial or economic position, but a product of the decolonial love he shares with his wife, and of testimony to his long and storied history of Dominican colonization, exploitation, and oppression. An important part of Yunior's testimony inherently involves the written and spoken word, his own zafa against the fukú. In this way, Díaz also emphasizes the importance of writing as necessary to acknowledging and reformulating—reorienting—notions of manhood and Dominican machismo. Through his writing, he can decolonize his Dominican cultural heritage and upbringing, and reorient them toward relationships free from the harmful effects of hierarchy and domination.



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